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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/C, DS/IP/AF, DS/TIA/ITA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/19/2020

TAGS: ASEC BY PTER

SUBJECT: UNCONFIRMED REPORT OF EXTREMIST CELL IN BURUNDI

Classified By: CDA Judy Buelow for reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (S) Summary. On 17 January, the founder of the MSD political party, Alexis Sinduhije, met with RSO Bujumbura. Sinduhije requested this meeting to report his knowledge of a possible terrorist cell in Burundi. Sinduhije stated one of his party members had learned that two Arabs and four Somalis had arrived in Burundi, and planned to hold a meeting of Burundian youth in a mosque in the northern city of Ngozi. The source was unable to provide specifics, but he was suspected the proposed meeting was linked to Islamic militancy. RSO relayed Sinduhije's source's name and contact information to RAO Kigali. RSO and RAO are yet unable to determine whether there are truly any suspicious foreigners or activity, or what motives are behind the supposed meeting and recruitment of Burundian youth. End Summary.

¶2. (S) RSO Bujumbura held a meeting with MSD party founder and politician Alexis Sinduhije at his request at the Chancery on 17 January at 1930. RAO was present at the Chancery, but remained in another room; ARSO related the meeting's progress under pretense of leaving the meeting to call a Kigali-based counterterrorism specialist on a secure phone. Sinduhije stated that on 14 January, he met with a Muslim MSD party member from the northern city of Ngozi (Source). Source is affiliated with a particular mosque in Ngozi.

¶3. (S) In his meeting with Sinduhije, Source stated that al-Shabaab was in Burundi, but could not provide specific evidence of this. Source claimed a Burundian who had studied theology in Nairobi had returned to Burundi and begun to make preparations for the arrival of six others, two Arabs and four Somalis. Source stated the group contacted him and asked him to participate in a meeting of Muslim youth to occur on 22 January; source was suspicious of the group and believed they fit a pattern of enticing young Muslims towards radical ideology in preparation for enacting a terrorist plot. Source requested permission from Sinduhije to attend the meeting, which Sinduhije granted.

¶4. (S) Sinduhije stated he was bringing the information to the US Embassy because the Burundian national intelligence service (SNR) is his number one enemy. Sinduhije therefore believed that if he brought this information to the Burundian authorities himself, he would be immediately arrested for involvement in a terrorist plot or held indefinitely in the general prison population for "investigative purposes," as is common for witnesses in Burundi. (Sinduhije and many political activists suspect that the SNR is behind politically-motivated assassinations; they believe the national intelligence agency is a tool of the ruling party.) Sinduhije told us that to protect Burundi's security, he must notify someone who could act on the information.

¶5. (S) Sinduhije could give no further information on specific threats or plots, but stated Source would be willing to share his information so long as he would not draw unwarranted attention by doing so; RSO consulted with RAO and offered the opportunity for Source to travel to Embassy Kigali to share the confidential information. Using a prepaid cell phone provided by RAO, Sinduhije contacted Source and arranged a meeting. RSO further informed

Sinduhije that the matter would be best handled directly between Embassy Kigali and Source, and that for everyone's safety, Sinduhije should avoid further involvement. (Note: RAO does not have an official liaison relationship with the Burundian SNR, which has a record of serious human rights abuses. RAO considers the SNR's level of professionalism to be low, and does not believe it would investigate the Source's allegations effectively. The meeting ended amiably and RSO escorted Sinduhije out of the Chancery at 2130.

¶6. (S) Approximately 45 minutes after the meeting, DATT received a telephone call from an apparently drunk Gilbert Bulanje, Director of External Intelligence for the SNR, Burundi's national intelligence service. Bulanje demanded to know why the Embassy had met with Sinduhije on a Sunday evening. The DAO deflected the question and notified RSO of Bulanje's inquiry via encrypted radio. The following morning, Bulanje, now sober, called the DATT again, and demanded that DATT meet with the SNR Chief of Staff to explain the Sunday night meeting. We are considering how, or if, Post should respond to this request.

¶7. (S) Comment. Post remains wary of Sinduhije's intentions; he is a skilled political grandstander, and in light of the minimal details known, Post is hesitant to draw any conclusions. However, it stands to reason that Sinduhije would be unwilling to deal with the SNR or Burundian National Police, and Post feels his fears of arrest or worse in connection with this information are valid. Post is confident that direct contact between Source and RAO will be effective in obtaining further details on the situation in Ngozi, and devising a plan of action if warranted. End Comment.

Buelow